Halfway to History: Progress & Challenges in Closing Rikers Island

FACT SHEET

The Plan to Close Rikers Island
Under New York City law, the Rikers Island jails must be closed entirely by August 31, 2027. Rikers has long been an incubator of violence, crime, and suffering. Closing Rikers and replacing it with a more efficient and effective system of borough-based jails and secure hospital beds is essential to safety, justice, and racial equity for all New Yorkers, including people locked up and working in the jails under dangerous and decrepit conditions, and crime victims. The plan to close Rikers has five elements:

1. **Safe and Effective Jail Reduction**: Methodically and significantly reduce the incarcerated population. The Lippman Commission’s 2021 and 2022 blueprints lay out how to do this, while increasing public safety.

2. **Shutting Rikers**: Replace the Rikers jails, built on decaying landfill and plagued by terrible sightlines, broken cell doors, and sewage leaks, with a new system slated to have 3,544 jail beds and 380 secure hospital beds.

3. **Culture Change**: Transform Rikers’ chaotic environment into one characterized by strong management and oversight, safe conditions for people incarcerated and working in the jails, and a focus on successful reentry.

4. **Renewable Rikers**: Remake the island into a hub of green infrastructure, advancing the fight against climate change and allowing removal of polluting power and sewage plants from overburdened communities.

5. **Community Reinvestment**: Reinvest the billions of dollars that will be saved by closing Rikers into communities disproportionately harmed by a legacy of underinvestment and overincarceration.

New York City’s Daily Jail Population (Updated as of October 20, 2022)
- **Overall Daily Jail Population**: From over 20,400 people in 1991, the daily jail population dropped to just over 9,200 in October 2017. On October 20, 2022, 5,861 people were jailed. The population reached a low of 3,809 on April 29, 2020, after NYC strategically and carefully released people to meet COVID’s dangers.

- **Most People are JailedAwaiting Trial**: People held before trial—while presumed innocent—make up 84% of the October 2022 jail population—up from 56% in March 2020.

- **Half the People Need Mental Health Treatment**: On October 20, 2022, 51% of people in NYC jails had received mental health services, up from 42% in October 2017. That includes 85% of women and 49% of men. As of September 2022, 18% of people in jail had a serious mental illness, up from 10% in FY 2017.

- **Prolonged Times in Custody**: People held pretrial on October 20, 2022 had been held 286 days on average—25 days more than before the pandemic—keeping them and crime victims waiting for answers and accountability. While courts have significantly reduced their COVID-related backlog, the Lippman Commission and DCJ project ending the backlog and pre-pandemic delays would mean 1,300 fewer people in Rikers.

![NYC Jail Population (Oct. 2017 - Oct. 2022)](image)

Reason for Incarceration: October 20, 2022 (Total Jail Population = 5,861)

- Pretrial Detention: 4,932 (84%)
- Parole Violation: New Arrest: 197 (3%)
- Technical Parole Violation: 6 (0.1%)
- City Jail Sentence: 461 (8%)
- Additional Categories: 265 (5%)

Source: NYC Department of Correction, analyzed by the Data Collaborative for Justice. Numbers are for the 1st of the month except Oct. 2022 is as of the 20th.
• **Longer Stays with Mental Health Needs:** As of October 20, 2020, people awaiting trial who had received mental health services in jail had been held over 50% longer than others (340 vs. 224 days).

• **Most People Held Pretrial Are Alleged to Have Committed a Violent Crime:** As of October 15, 2022, 79% of the 4,932 people jailed pretrial were charged with violent felonies, 17% with nonviolent felonies, and 4% with misdemeanors or lesser charges. The violent felony numbers include 1,499 people charged with murder, 660 with robbery, 510 with assault, and 460 with firearms or other weapons offenses.

• **Increasing Sentenced Population:** Just over 460 people, representing 8% of the October 2022 jail population, were held on sentences of under a year. While a steep decline from over 1,200 held on such sentences in October 2017, the sentenced population had reached as few as 129 people on April 29, 2020.

• **Few Held on Alleged Parole Violations:** Just 3% of the October 2022 daily jail population (totaling 203 people) were held on alleged technical parole violations or alleged parole violations stemming from a new arrest—an over 80% decline from 13 months ago, when Governor Kathy Hochul signed the Less is More Act on September 17, 2021.

• **Worsening Racial Disparities:** Although Black people make up 24% of NYC’s general population, they are 61% of the City’s daily jail population as of October 20, 2022, up from 55% in October 2017.

• **Women’s Incarceration:** From October 2017 to October 2022, the number of women at Rikers declined 44% to 344. Criminal justice actors had reduced that number safely to 149 at the start of pandemic. The Commission, DCJ, and the Women’s Community Justice Association have laid out safe, effective, gender-responsive strategies to have fewer than 100 women and gender-expansive people in jail on any given day.

• **Population by Borough:** As of September 2022, 32% of the jail population was incarcerated on cases filed in Manhattan, 25% in Brooklyn, 21% in the Bronx, 18% in Queens, and 4% in Staten Island. Manhattan’s share fell 6% (from 38%) from 2017, while Brooklyn’s and the Bronx’s each rose by 3 points.

### Jail Conditions and Cost

• **Stabbings and Slashings:** In the past five years, stabbings and slashings in NYC jails have tripled (from 165 in FY2017 to 491 in FY2022). The rate of such violent events per 1,000 people in jail increased more than fivefold from 17.4 in FY2017 to 88.3 in FY2022.

• **Assaults on Staff:** Assaults on staff increased by 29% from 2017 to 2021 (864 to 1,117), before declining in 2022 (537 through August). Comparing the first nine months of 2021 and 2022, the rate of assaults on staff per 1,000 jailed people dropped by 31%.

• **Deaths in Custody:** Through October 24, 2022, 17 incarcerated people have died vs. 6 deaths in 2017.

• **Cost of $500,000 Per Person:** Rikers costs NYC taxpayers about $500,000 per incarcerated person per year.

• **Billions in Savings from the City’s Jail Plan:** The Lippman Commission and CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) estimate the smaller, more efficient borough-based jails will save the City $2 billion per year in operating costs. The new jails will be paid for with bonds, repaid over a 30-year period. The Commission and ISLG estimate that even with construction inflation of over 20%, absent any cost-saving measures for the new jails, those bond payments will cost roughly $660 million per year. The City should also spend $275 million, or $18 million per year in bond payments, for a new training academy for correction officers. That would leave a net savings of over $1.3 billion per year, which could be reinvested in communities. By contrast, building new jails on Rikers would cost up to 15% more and take years longer. Doing so would also be illegal under NYC law.

### Justice, Safety, and the Promise of Closing Rikers Island

For three decades before COVID, New York City simultaneously cut both the jail population and major crimes by 70%. Using proven policies and practices that NYC has already shown increase safety, justice, and racial equity far more effectively and cheaply than Rikers, we can and must return to that path, and close Rikers forever.

Prepared by Michael Rempel at the Data Collaborative for Justice (DCJ) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (mrempel@jjay.cuny.edu) and Zachary Katzenelson at the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform (zachary@morejustnyc.org).